



Richard H. Stewart, Jr.
American Legion Post 543
St. James, NC 28461

SUBJECT: General Membership Meeting Minutes

DATE: Wednesday July 26, 2023.

LOCATION: St. James Community Center.

1) Call to Order: Commander Phillip McGhee called to order the July 26, 2023, General Membership Meeting of the Richard H. Stewart, Jr., St. James, NC Post 543 at 7:00pm.

2) Presentation of Colors: The colors were then presented, saluted and put in place by the Post 543 Honor Guard, followed by:

- a) The opening prayer by Chaplain Chuck Francka.
- b) The Commander led the members in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.
- c) The POW/MIA recognition was recited by Commander McGhee.
- d) The Preamble to the American Legion Constitution was projected and Commander McGhee led the members in reciting it aloud.

3) Roll Call of Officers and Committee Chairs: (McGhee).

- a) Officers Present:
Phillip McGhee, Commander
Jim Hilty, Interim Adjutant
Mike Carton, Finance Officer
Dan Bennett, Vice Commander Resource Development
Chuck Blackburn, Deputy Vice Commander Americanism & Youth
Doug Pratt, Deputy Vice Commander Active Duty Support
Chuck Francka, Chaplain
Bob Davis, Sergeant-at-Arms
Jim McCriskin, Public Relations
Steve Muir, Service Officer
Gary Purcell, Vice Commander Membership
- b) Officers Absent:
Rick Sessa, Historian (excused)
Arthur "Doc" Liberty, Judge Advocate (excused)
- c) Others Present:
Bill Agnostak, Adjutant-nominee

4) Sick Call: Chaplain Francka reported that Dr. Tony Simonelli, a long-time member of the post passed away, and Jacqueline McNutt a non-member has also passed.

5) Approval of Minutes: The draft minutes of the June 28, 2023 General Membership Meeting was approved as posted on the Post website.

6) Commander McGhee invited any new members or visiting veterans to stand and introduce themselves. New members David Arntsen and Karen Yap stood and introduced themselves. Visiting veterans Jim Brown, Jeff Muir, Tom Mulcher and Al Hoke also stood and were recognized. All were warmly welcomed by the Post members.

7) Officer and Committee Reports.

- a) Membership Report: Gary Purcell reported that Membership cards are now available and members can now pay their dues (\$45) for FY24 effective July 1, 2023.
- b) Finance Report: Finance Officer Mike Carton presented the FY 24 Finance Report, showing spending of 9.83 percent effective July 26, 2023. A motion to approve the report as presented was passed unanimously.
- c) Active Duty Support: Deputy Vice Commander Doug Pratt reviewed three upcoming events that his team would be supporting:
 - i) On August 4, 2023, the Post will host a cook-out at the USCG Oak Island Station in celebration of the US Coast Guard's 233rd Anniversary.
 - ii) On August 11, 2023, the Active Duty Team will sponsor a fishing trip for four soldiers from the Fort Liberty SRU.
 - iii) In August the team will meet with LTC Baker and the JROTC leadership to select the Cadet of the Year.
- d) Athletics Officer: Leo Mercado presented a 2023 Baseball Season Wrap Up.
 - i) Leo reported that only 8 of the scheduled 14 games were played due to rain. The team faced several challenges. They played with a short roster (only 18 vs. 25), had difficulty with player availability, and were short on pitchers all year. They also had several schedule changes that forced them to play 3 doubleheaders in 5 days. The team won 2 and lost 6.
 - ii) Financially the season's expenses and revenue broke just about as projected.
 - iii) In the off season consideration will be given to a Senior vs. Junior Team and to establishing an Athletics Program Committee.
- e) Service Officer Report. (Steve Muir)
 - i) Steve provided a very quick update on some of the 13 Veterans' cases he is currently tracking, commenting in particular on one case of a deceased E-9 Marine whose widow needed assistance in recovering benefits.
 - ii) Steve advised members who planned on pursuing claims under the PACT Act to get busy, as over \$1 billion in retroactive payments have been distributed. In North Carolina over 12,000 decisions have been issued and \$6 million in retroactive payments.
 - iii) Steve reminded members that the Veterans Experience Action Center (VEAC) will be held October 19-21 in Wilmington at the National Guard Armory. A call will be issued for volunteers later in the summer.

- f) Elections Committee: Doug Pratt, Chairman of the Elections Committee reported that the Special Election for adjutant had yielded one nominee, Bill Agnostak. Commander McGhee thanked Doug for the report and then asked for a motion from the floor for unanimous consent to elect Bill Agnostak adjutant, there being no other nominees. The motion was made and approved without dissent and, therefore, Bill Agnostak was declared elected adjutant.

Commander McGhee invited Bill Agnostak to come forward to the lectern and the Commander administered the oath of office as Post 543 adjutant.



- g) Vice Commander Resource Development: Dan Bennett reporting for the SJMAD said the proceeds from the Patriotic Concert and the Golf Tournament have not yet been tallied but preliminary indications are that the proceeds will exceed last year's record returns. Also, the Executive Committee, after considerable deliberation and consideration of the competition from other patriotic and veteran-themed golf outings at St. James, has decided to move the dates for next year's concert and golf tournament to a late-October early-November timeframe.

- h) Veterans Memorial Committee: Tom Picinich, reporting for the Veterans Memorial Committee, said renovations to the sidewalks and the installation of new pavers were now complete. Tom said he was taking orders for new memorial bricks so they would be available by Veterans Day.

8) Special Recognitions.

- a) Members of the Honor Guard, led by Aaron Largent, called forth Ted Eckenhoff and Bill Bruce for special recognition and presented to them American Legion Certificates of Appreciation and special gifts to thank them for their continuing support of the Post. Mr. Eckenhoff has provided his truck and Mr. Bruce has added the railings that allow Post members to ride in comfort in the Southport 4th of July Parade and other parades. We were honored that Mr. Eckenhoff and Mr. Bruce were accompanied by their significant others.



b) We point with pride to the accomplishments of Post member Bob Duke, Founder of the Lower Cape Fear Region Wounded Warrior Project Golf Ball Donation Program. Bob has been selected to be honored at the WWP Courage Awards and Benefits Dinner in Washington DC in September. Bob's program has raised over \$472,000 since its inception. Bob is joined by Dave and Holly Williams within St. James and they will join him in the trip to Washington. Bob said it is his hope – indeed, his expectation – that he will reach the \$500,000 mark this year.

9) Special Guest Speaker: Homer E. Wright. Homer was introduced to the members by former commander Steve Ratti. Founder and Developer of St. James, North Carolina, Homer Wright has done as much in his 98 years as anyone could hope to do in three or four lifetimes. Born in what is now Eden, NC, Homer is a U.S. Army Veteran of WWII, a Medic in the 85th Infantry Division. After the war he ran a successful retail business before shifting to real estate and focusing his energies in the 1990s and thereafter developing St. James. His contributions to building the community and the Town of St. James recently led Governor Roy Cooper to award Homer the coveted Order of the Long Leaf Pine.

Homer warmly and enthusiastically greeted the members of the American Legion Post 543 profoundly thanking them for their service to their community. His remarks stressed the point of voluntary service to the community as the key to building and strengthening a community over time. In the many years that it took to plan and develop St. James, he said, it could never have succeeded without men and women such as the Veterans in this room. A successful community, he insisted, requires volunteers, people who care for other people, working to give back and to help others.

Rather than speak about himself and his accomplishments, Mr. Wright chose, instead, to emphasize the collected accomplishments of veterans still serving America, still striving to make it a better place; just as Homer Wright has been doing for all these years.

The Members accorded Mr. Wright a much-deserved standing ovation.



10) Commander McGhee's Closing Remarks:

- a) Commander McGhee commended the Honor Guard on managing to execute three ceremonies during this week of intense heat and with Bill Morgan unable to lead because of travel and then ill with Covid.
- b) Commander McGhee noted that on or about August 15 the Town of St. James is expecting to receive a military display case for City Hall. Mayor Toner asked the Post to provide appropriate artifacts and mementoes to put into the display case. Your ideas and suggestions are welcomed.

The next general membership meeting is August 23, 2023.

- 11) Closing Ceremony. Chaplain Chuck Francka offered a closing prayer.
- 12) Commander McGhee called for the Honor Guard to retire the colors.
- 13) Commander McGhee adjourned the monthly meeting at 7:47 PM.

JAMES HILTY
Interim Adjutant

PHILLIP E. MCGHEE
COMMANDER